Addressing the Myths of Terrorism in America

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Abstract
In the aftermath of 9/11, the intersection of sensational media coverage, public fears, and political motivations has contributed to misconceptions about the nature of terrorism and the perpetrators of extremist violence. The current study uses data from the Extremist Crime Database and Global Terrorism Database to address the myths of terrorism in the United States. We examine jihadist-inspired, far-right, and far-left incidents to provide an empirical critique of turn of the century popular discourse that suggests terrorism (1) incidents are increasing, (2) fatalities and injuries are increasing, and is committed by (3) internationally based, (4) jihadist-inspired extremists, (5) of Arab decent, (6) working in organized groups. The results highlight the reality of the terrorism problem finding incidents are decreasing and often involve no deaths or injuries. Additionally, terrorists are more often domestic-based, White, far-right extremists, acting alone. We conclude with a discussion of findings and implications for public knowledge and policy responses to terrorism and extremist violence.

Keywords
terrorism, extremist violence, ideologically motivated crime, discourse, open-source data

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 were the most deadly to occur in the United States. The attacks provoked deep concern and led to a series of responses. In its wake, America became inundated with media, public, and political discourse surrounding terrorism and extremist violence. The terrorism discourse developed into one of the most important conversations in the modern era (Jackson, 2007; Nacos, 2016). Public opinion became increasingly focused on the terrorist threat, with the majority of Americans indicating their top safety concern was rooted in targeted terrorist attacks from international actors (Clement & Eilperin, 2015; Freeman, 2016; Martin & Sussman, 2015; Mechanic, 2017; Salvanto, De Pinto, Dutton, & Backus, 2015; Telhami, 2015). Current popular discourse suggests terrorism poses a greater threat than war, invasion, accident, natural disasters, and

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criminal activity (Nacos, 2016; Wolfendale, 2007). Counterterrorism rhetoric emphasizes the threat to security, lives, values, freedom, democracy, and the existence of civilization itself (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017; Wolfendale, 2007). These narratives contributed to a rapid transformation in security priorities including new anti-terrorism laws, agencies, doctrines, strategies, programs, initiatives, and measures (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017; Jackson, 2007). The problem with contemporary discourse and subsequent responses to terrorism is they may be rooted in popularized myths and misunderstandings of the phenomenon.

Terrorism myths refer to distorted perceptions of extremist violence in popular discourse (LaFree, 2011). Myths provide a way for individuals to make sense of the world around them and explain events or processes that are not readily understood (Kappeler & Potter, 2017). As such, myths allow for a social reality of crime, which serves as little more than convenient gap-filler for questions that science has yet to address (Quinney, 1970). LaFree (2011) used the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to examine common myths surrounding the global terrorism problem. He highlights popular beliefs suggesting most global terrorist attacks rely on sophisticated weaponry and result in an enormous number of fatalities. However, LaFree (2011) found that the vast majority of terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2007 used readily accessible explosives and firearms. Additionally, over half of the attacks resulted in no fatalities (55%), with only 1.5% resulting in more than 25 deaths. These findings provide important policy implications by suggesting global terrorism-prevention strategies may be rooted in myths surrounding sensational cases.

LaFree's (2011) findings also suggest the current public and political reactions to terrorism in the United States may be similarly rooted in myths about the phenomenon. This misinformation in popular discourse surrounding terrorism can have consequences. In the aftermath of 9/11, terrorism discourse influenced public perceptions of risk (Altheide, 2007; Chermak, Bailey, & Brown, 2003; Nacos, 2016), potential perpetrators (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Nacos, 2016; Shaheen, 2003), and the implementation of security measures (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017; Jackson, 2007). It is important to empirically investigate whether the realities of terrorism match the social perception and social concern. Often, public perceptions of an issue are not closely aligned with social reality. However, such divergences have important implications for policy on terrorism and extremist violence.

This study extends LaFree's (2011) approach by identifying empirical evidence and comparing it to public perceptions and common assumptions about post–9/11 terrorism in America. We use open-source data from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to identify the reality of the problem and compare it to six common assumptions (proposed in media reports) surrounding terrorism incident occurrences, victimization rates, and perpetrator typologies. This work is presented in five sections. First, we highlight popular assumptions (i.e., myths) and previous research investigating the phenomenon. In the second section, we set forth our methodological framework including our terrorism definition, inclusion criteria, operationalization of variables, and analytic strategy. In third section, we compare the empirical findings to six common assumptions about the nature of terrorism and extremist violence in the United States. We discuss our findings and their policy implications in the fourth section. Finally, we conclude by outlining some of our study's limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Terrorism Scholarship

Terrorism research greatly increased after the 9/11 attacks. Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley's (2006) systematic review of terrorism and political violence literature found that over 50% of peer-reviewed articles between 1971 and 2002 were published in just 2 years—2001/2002. Despite this increased

interest, post–9/11 research initially suffered from weak methodological designs including few multivariate quantitative studies. Terrorism scholarship was largely conceptual, philosophical, and/or analyzing extant research (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). In other words, restricted access to government files and records related to terrorism meant studies were limited in their ability to provide systematic quantitative analyses (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017). For example, Lum et al. (2006) found only 3–4% of the 6,041 peer-reviewed articles they examined employed some form of empirical analysis on terrorism data or information.

In addition, the 9/11 attacks directed most of the research agenda toward jihadist-inspired studies (LaFree, Dugan, & Miller, 2016; Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2006). This is because scholarly interest in terrorism is often dependent upon funding provided by governmental and law enforcement agencies, whose interests are largely event-driven (Crenshaw, 2000; Lum et al., 2006). For example, during the 1970s and early 1980s, terrorism concern and scholarship were largely associated with the far-left or nationalist resistance (e.g., the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army; Crenshaw, 2000; Rapoport, 2002). In the late 1980s and 1990s, U.S. attention and subsequent scholarship focused on far-right extremism including the activities of the survivalist, militia, and Christian Identity movement—particularly in the aftermath of second deadliest terrorist attack, the Oklahoma City bombing (Barkun, 1996; Crenshaw, 2000). In the aftermath of 9/11, scholarly interest in terrorism overall increased exponentially, but no ideological group and/or event had generated as much research interest as jihadist-inspired extremism (LaFree et al., 2016; Lum et al., 2006). Most recently, a large majority of scholarly and public interest has turned toward failed and foiled plots targeting the United States (Klein, Gruenewald, & Smith, 2017).

However, contemporary research has made tremendous advances toward addressing issues with quantitative assessment across ideological spectrums. Scholarly data sets, including the GTD and ECDB, have turned to using open-source data as an effective means for quantitatively analyzing the terrorism problem at-large (Gruenewald & Pridemore, 2012). LaFree (2011) used the GTD to examine the global terrorism problem, finding the majority of terrorism only occurs in 10% of countries, terrorism was on the decline in the decade leading up to 9/11, and the United States is only the 20th most targeted country for terrorism. Studies have used the ECDB to quantitatively assess the terrorism problem in the United States beyond jihadist-inspired incidents and perpetrators. For instance, studies using the ECDB have examined homicides perpetrated by far-right extremists (Parkin, Freilich, & Chermak, 2015), far-right lone-wolf homicides (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013b), and the organizational dynamics of far-right hate groups (Chermak, Freilich, & Suttmoeller, 2013). Similarly, studies have examined the impact of left-wing extremists, predominantly as it relates to the environmental and animal movement (Chermak, Freilich, & Simone, 2010; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; González, Freilich, & Chermak, 2014). Finally, Chermak and Gruenewald (2015) quantitatively compare jihadist-inspired, far-right, and far-left terrorism in the United States and provide valuable insight into individual and contextual sociodemographic characteristics between terrorism types. Taken together, these studies illustrate the threat of far-right and far-left terrorism at the turn of the century and highlight the importance of providing an overall quantitative assessment of the problem.

What is surprisingly absent from the terrorism literature is research regarding aspects of terrorism that are more likely to affect individuals, their fear, and the ramifications of anti-terrorism efforts (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017; Lum et al., 2006). While the fear of crime literature is substantial (Lane, Rader, Henson, Fischer, & May, 2014; Warr, 2000), the fear of terrorism literature is still lacking (Oates, 2006; Skoll, 2016). However, counterterrorism policy is predominantly fear-driven and often based on misguided stereotypes (Altheide, 2006). Some research suggests that fear as a reactionary measure to terrorism does not manifest itself in the United States in the same way as other global contexts (Hewitt, 2003). This is most likely a direct result of the rareness of American terrorism. In other words, U.S. terrorist events are relatively rare and leave little time for stable manifestations of

fear and anxiety to occur (Lewis, 2000). To address these issues, the following subsection identifies (1) six myths suggested by media outlets, (2) the popular discourse (via scholarship assessing media, public, and political discourse) contributing to these potential misconceptions, and (3) research/ limitations in research examining distorted perceptions of terrorism.

Terrorism Myths

Reporters and journalists from a variety of media outlets have suggested myths in popular discourse surrounding terrorism. For example, in the *Washington Post*, Krueger (2007) addressed myths including the popular beliefs that terrorists are no different than ordinary criminals,[1] terrorists are likely to cross into the United States from Mexico, and terrorism is mainly perpetrated by Muslims. In the *Guardian*, Burke (2015) addressed myths promoting a sprawling global jihadist-inspired terrorist organization, with obedient operatives and sleeper cells on every continent. In the *New York Times*, Davis and Nixon (2018) attempted to debunk the political rhetoric suggesting the majority of terrorists are foreign-born. The problem with these suggested myths is they are often based on assumptions and conjecture, given reporters' lack of access to data and available evidence. As such, it is important to narrow down the proposed myths and provide an empirical assessment of the problem. While it is impossible to address the countless myths identified in the overwhelming news coverage dedicated to terrorism, the current study specifically focuses on the myths surrounding popular post–9/11 discourse.

Three interrelated forces drive popular discourse including mass media, governmental agendas, and the general public (Barak, 1988; Jewkes & Linnemann, 2017; Kingdon, 2003). This popular discourse is largely driven by high-profile incidents that capture, curate, and distort the American mind-set (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2017). The 9/11 attacks have been characterized as the most high-profile terrorism incident of the 21st century and have therefore had the greatest impact on popular discourse. In the aftermath of 9/11, studies find terrorism discourse has had an enormous impact on public perceptions of risk (Altheide, 2007; Chermak et al., 2003; Nacos, 2016), conceptualizations of potential perpetrators (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Nacos, 2016; Shaheen, 2003), and the implementation of security measures (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017; Jackson, 2007). Thus, it is important to assess the myths in post–9/11 discourse that are contributing to the greatest impact on public and policy responses to the phenomenon.

The first myth in popular discourse is that terrorism incidents are on the rise (Champion, 2017). Altheide (2007) finds mass media accounts of the "war on terror" are grounded in a discourse of fear that persistently communicates an expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life. Newport (2015) finds this fear has continued throughout the turn of the century. In 2015, nearly half of Americans said they were "very" or "somewhat" worried about becoming a terrorism victim—the highest rating since late 2001 (Newport, 2015). Comparatively, a Gallup Poll (2018) found only 24% of Americans were worried about terrorism a few months before 9/11. While a rise is expected in the immediate aftermath of an attack, this rise has remained consistent ever since. A 2015 CBS News Poll found 79% of respondents felt that a major terrorist attack was likely within the next few months (Salvanto et al., 2015). These sentiments speak directly to the issue that anxiety and fear of terrorism rose and remained high in the aftermath of 9/11. This perception of terrorism is largely driven by recent high-profile incidents in Boston, San Bernardino, and Orlando that resulted in a large number of casualties. Immediately following the San Bernardino shootings, news outlets and polls reported that an increasing number of Americans view terrorism as a top security issue (Martin & Sussman, 2015).

Studies have attempted to address this myth by highlighting the different waves of modern terrorism (Crenshaw, 1991; LaFree, Yang, & Crenshaw, 2009; Rapoport, 2013; Ross & Gurr, 1989). These studies suggest an overall increase in global religious (i.e., jihadist-inspired)

violence at the turn of the century. However, they fail to consider the general rise or fall of all post–9/11 terrorism in America. Hewitt (2003) explains how American terrorism can be categorized across nine separate waves: White racist terrorism of the South (1954–1972), Black terrorism (1964–1974), revolutionary leftist terrorism (1964–1948), Puerto Rican separatism (1969–1992), Jewish terrorism (1969–1987), Cuban terrorism (1968–1982), antiabortion terrorism (1977–2000), far-right terrorism (1979–2000), and most recently Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. The current study attempts to address aspects of domestic waves in an effort to provide a more contemporary analysis.

The second myth is fatalities and injuries resulting from terrorism are increasing (Wright, 2017). Studies suggest one of the most important homicide incident characteristics influencing the salience of coverage is the number of victims (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Duwe, 2000; Silva & Capellan, 2019). This supports the generally accepted media axiom, "If it bleeds, it leads" (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). For example, Mitnik, Freilich, and Chermak (2018) find one of the most significant indicators of post–9/11 newsworthiness is the number of deaths and injuries. This sensational and violent coverage then draws public and political attention (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006) and influences perceptions of victimization surrounding the phenomenon (see, e.g., Altheide, 2007; Chermak et al., 2003; Nacos, 2016). For instance, Nellis and Savage (2012) find exposure to terrorism-related news is positively associated with perceived risk of terrorism to oneself and other people. In a 2015 Post-ABC Poll, 83% of registered voters admitted they believed a terrorist attack resulting in a large number of casualties was imminent for the immediate future (Clement & Eilperin, 2015). While the salience of media coverage is intended to draw the public discourse toward the belief that terrorism casualties are on the rise, empirical research indicates that terrorism poses less of a threat compared to other activities (Wolfendale, 2007) and may be decreasing in the aftermath of 9/11 (Mitnik, Freilich, & Chermak, 2018). As such, it is important to provide further assessment of terrorism victimization at the turn of the century.

The third myth is international terrorism (i.e., terrorism perpetrated by foreign actors) that poses a far greater threat than domestic terrorism (i.e., terrorism perpetrated by American citizens; Davis & Nixon, 2018). Powell's (2011) analysis of post–9/11 media coverage finds international terrorism coverage is dominant, and domestic terrorism is only cast as a minor threat. A recent Gallup Poll indicates terrorism is currently ranked the most critical international threat to the United States (McCarthy, 2016). Importantly, more than 50% of adults surveyed opposed accepting refugees from Middle Eastern countries such as Syria. This speaks directly to a sense of heightened anxiety Americans feel regarding international threats as opposed to domestic threats. This threat outranks the development of nuclear weapons by Iran, cyberterrorism, and the spread of infectious disease (McCarthy, 2016). However, Chermak and Gruenewald (2006) found pre–9/11 terrorism was fairly evenly split between domestic (44%) and international attacks (51%). Since then, Mitnik et al. (2018) find the post–9/11 domestic threat has increased dramatically. Despite this, they suggest international terrorism is likely to receive more media coverage, thereby reinforcing the myth. While these findings demystify the international threat, they fail to consider the distinctions between citizens and noncitizens as well as foreign-born and non-foreign-born terrorists. These distinctions are especially important when considering President Trump's recent call for more "extreme vetting" of immigrants (Wilts & Sampathkumar, 2018).

The fourth myth is that jihadist-inspired attacks pose the greatest threat to U.S. security (Burke, 2015). The international threat coincides with the general perception of terrorist perpetrators being foreign-based jihadist-inspired extremists (Mitnik et al., 2018). In popular discourse, "it is seen as self-evident that Islamic terrorism remains one of the most significant threats to the Western world in general and U.S. national security in particular" (Jackson, 2007, p. 407). In 2015, 47% of Americans were "very" or "somewhat" worried that they or a family member would become a victim of an Islamic State–inspired terrorist attack (Swift, 2015). Additionally, government officials

are apt to suggest that jihadist-inspired terrorism is such a potent force that it threatens to destroy Western democracy, civilization, and our entire way of life (Jackson, 2007). As noted, research finds terrorism comes in waves, and 9/11 was representative of a fourth wave of terrorism known as the "religious wave." However, studies also illustrate the threat of far-right/left terrorism at the turn of the century (Chermak et al., 2010; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; González et al., 2014; Gruenewald et al., 2013b; Parkin et al., 2015). As such, it is important to consider whether a new wave has emerged, potentially introducing a fifth wave of terrorism.

The fifth myth is perpetrators are of Arab decent (Krueger, 2007). The myths surrounding international threats and jihadist-inspired attacks are conflated and act to reinforce the publics' construction of perpetrators' race/ethnicity. Media outlets emphasize audiences' preconceived notions of criminality and contribute to cultural typifications of "normal crime" characteristics for typical offenders (Chermak, 1994). This produces simplified crime scripts that are often rooted in racial stereotypes (Gruenewald, Parkin, & Chermak, 2014). In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a tremendous increase in focus on Islam, Muslims, and Arabs in television, radio, and print press (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Nacos, 2016). Because of the limited amount of information most Americans have about Middle Eastern culture, terrorism images served an essentializing function (Shah & Thornton, 1994), in that the essence of a terrorist was being Arab (Powell, 2011, 2018). In the public discourse, White perpetrators are portrayed as exhibiting some sort of mental disorder, whereas "brown-skinned" perpetrators are demonized and immediately labeled terrorists; thus, the idea that terrorism is an "Arab" problem becomes the natural assumption (Mechanic, 2017). Despite the scholarship surrounding stereotypes and stigmatizations associated with perpetrators, studies have largely overlooked the actual relationship between race/ethnicity and terrorist attacks.

The final myth is terrorist violence is largely carried out by a global network of organized groups (Burke, 2015). In recent discourse, fear of terrorism has been directly tied to the impact of larger terrorist organizations. In the post–9/11 discourse, the primary concern was al-Qaeda and the threat Osama bin Laden and his followers posed to national security. More recently, public attention has been directed toward Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) as the largest threat to American security and interests (Freeman, 2016; Telhami, 2015). This differential concern for cells with a traditional hierarchical structure invariably ignores the significance and impact of lone actors who can operate more discreetly than organized groups. Powell (2011, 2018) finds the media focus on international and Muslim/Arab/Islamic terrorism emphasizes the notion of organized terrorist cells against a "Christian America." Popular discourse has asserted that there are thousands of militant jihadists, many of whom trained in the Afghan campaign, who are linked together in a global network of terror (e.g., al-Qaeda, ISIS, ISIL; Jackson, 2007). In other words, terrorists are depicted as part of a worldwide network of top-down/centrally controlled conspiracies against the West (Shermer, 2015). In contrast, Sageman (2011) discusses the potency of a "leaderless jihad"—a decentralized network of cells evolving out of a more traditional structure, where localized groups execute operations from a bottom-up chain of command. More recent scholarship (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Spaaij, 2010; Spaaij & Hamm, 2015) suggests lone-wolf terrorism (i.e., with no direct ties to any formal organization) is an emerging threat. Despite this concern, these studies often provide limited comparisons between the reality of organized group and lone-wolf terrorism in the United States.

Current Study

The current study investigates popular post–9/11 terrorism discourse suggesting terrorism (1) incidents are increasing, (2) fatalities and injuries are increasing, and is committed by (3) internationally based, (4) jihadist-inspired extremists, (5) of Arab decent, (6) working in organized groups. This work uses the GTD and ECDB to advance terrorism research by providing comprehensive quantitative analysis of the overall terrorism problem. The purpose of this research is to fill

the gaps in knowledge regarding terrorism discourse, in an effort to bridge the divide between social perception and reality.

Method

Data

As with all terrorism studies, clearly defining the problem being examined is one of the most integral (and contentious) criteria (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017). This study defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force directed against civilian targets by non-state actors in order to attain a political goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (LaFree & Ackerman, 2009, p. 348). Utilizing this definition, the GTD and ECDB[2] were used to identify completed/failed/foiled terrorism incidents occurring between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 2017.[3] The GTD and ECDB are open-source databases that rely on publicly available information to identify key characteristics on U.S. terrorism and extremist violence across multiple levels. Specifically, the GTD is an event-level database that primarily focuses on incident characteristics of global terrorist events. The ECDB is a multilevel database that focuses on all characteristics of extremist events, suspects, and victims within the United States. The 1995 baseline was used because it was the year of the second deadliest terrorist attack (i.e., the Oklahoma City bombing), and it provides a context for understanding the phenomenon (i.e., incident and victim rates) prior to 9/11. This is an important year for beginning contemporary terrorism discourse studies because the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City introduced terrorism into the cultural lexicon (Lewis, 2005). Additionally, beginning the analysis in 1995 provides critical context, as this was the same year the Clinton Administration passed the Omnibus Counterterrorism Act—a legislative decision indicating the prominence of terrorism in America within political discourse (Lewis, 2005).

When organizing data, incidents from the GTD that did not occur in the United States were dropped. Next, this study identified duplicate cases across both data sets. Duplicate cases were retained from the ECDB (because the ECDB also includes suspect and victim characteristics needed for this study) and removed from the GTD. This resulted in a total of 630 incidents from the combined ECDB ($n = 409$)[4] and GTD ($n = 221$). The ECDB and GTD each have their own specific inclusion criteria. The GTD addresses terrorism contexts and relies on a broad definition of terrorism including events involving "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation" (LaFree & Dugan, 2007, p. 184). Additionally, the GTD requires incidents meet each of the following criteria for inclusion: (1) The incident must be intentional, (2) the incident must show evidence of some level of violence or the threat of violence, and (3) the incident must involve subnational actors. The GTD also limits its inclusion to incidents that resulted from some level of planning.

The disparity in overall incident counts is largely attributed to the ECDB encompassing more inclusive criteria that only require the act to be ideologically motivated and committed by an extremist. The ECDB thus includes many incidents that were committed almost spontaneously as a result of presented opportunities but were still ideologically motivated. In other words, while an incident may be included in the ECDB, it may not necessarily be included in the GTD. For example, in 2016, William Matthew Harvey, a White supremacist and member of the Aryan Brotherhood, stabbed and killed Shawn Russell seemingly because he was of Irish decent. While this incident meets the inclusion criteria for the ECDB, it does not fit the GTD inclusion criteria as it was unplanned but was still ideologically motivated.

After the incidents were identified, relevant incident, perpetrator, and victim characteristics were collected. As noted, the ECDB includes event- and offender-level data. While the GTD only includes incident-level data, perpetrator-level information was extracted from incident descriptions.

Once suspects were identified from the GTD incidents, subsequent coding (using open-source data) was conducted for the variables of interest wherever possible (i.e., ideology, race, citizenship, foreign-born, and lone wolf). This study only includes unique suspects, and even though suspects may have committed multiple incidents, they were only counted once in the analysis.

Operationalization of Variables

The final database was made up of incident and perpetrator characteristics relevant to this study. First, the *incident year* was collected. This was followed by continuous variables identifying the total number of *deaths* and *injuries*. These were also recoded into categorical variables measuring *deaths* (1) *0 deaths*, (2) *1 death*, (3) *2–3 deaths*, (4) *4–10 deaths*, or (5) *10+ deaths*, as well as *injuries* (1) *0 injuries*, (2) *1 injury*, (3) *2–3 injuries*, (4) *4–10 injuries*, or (5) *10+ injuries*.

Next, incident ideology was coded as (1) *jihadist inspired*, (2) *far right*, and (3) *far left*. The ECDB defines jihadist-inspired extremists as individuals who will only accept Islam as the true path toward human dignity.[5] The ECDB defines far-right extremists as fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, suspicious of federal authority, and reverent of individual liberties, particularly regarding their Second Amendment rights and government taxes.[6] Finally, the ECDB defines far-left extremists as those involved in animal and environmental rights movements (i.e., the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front).[7] It is important to note the ECDB currently only includes environmental and animal rights extremists in its sample of the far-left problem. However, in the interest of methodological exhaustiveness, this study expands the ECDB definition of far-left extremism by including "groups [and individuals] that want to bring about change through violent revolution rather than through established political processes" (LaFree & Bersani, 2012, p. 10). In line with previous research, these include incidents carried out by anti-government anarchists, Black separatists, and militant Black nationalists (Carson, 2017). By expanding the far-left definition, this study attempts to provide a more inclusive category with groups or individuals who are ideologically similar. Similar to environmental and animal rights extremists, anti-government anarchists, Black separatists, and militant Black nationalists believe the only way to preserve the natural order is through violence (Johnson, 2017).

Lone-wolf incidents were measured as (1) *lone wolf* and (2) *organized group*. Prior studies (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013a; Gruenewald et al., 2013b; Spaaij, 2010) have distinguished between loners (e.g., The Unabomber), lone wolves (e.g., Fort Hood Shooter) and lone-wolf packs (e.g., San Bernardino shooters). Given the contentious nature of defining lone-wolf terrorism (see, e.g., Holt, Freilich, Chermak, Mills, & Silva, 2019; Spaaij, 2010), this study provides a conservative approach to the phenomenon that only considers an incident a lone-wolf attack if it was committed by one or two actors (i.e., dyads such as the San Bernardino perpetrators) with no direct ties to any formal organization. In other words, incidents committed by single actors with direct ties to a formal organization and incidents committed by three or more actors, regardless of group affiliation, were considered organized group attacks.

Finally, the suspect-level variables measure the citizenship, alienage, and race/ethnicity of perpetrators. *Citizenship* is measured as (1) *noncitizen* and (2) *citizen*. *Alienage* refers to whether the perpetrator is foreign-born and is measured as (1) *foreign-born* and (2) *native-born*. Finally, *race/ethnicity* is measured as (1) *White*, (2) *Black (non-Hispanic)*, (3) *Arab*, and (4) *Other* (*Hispanic, Asian, and biracial*).

Analysis Description

The current study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon that is accessible for public consumption. To this end, this research utilizes descriptive statistics via line, bar, and
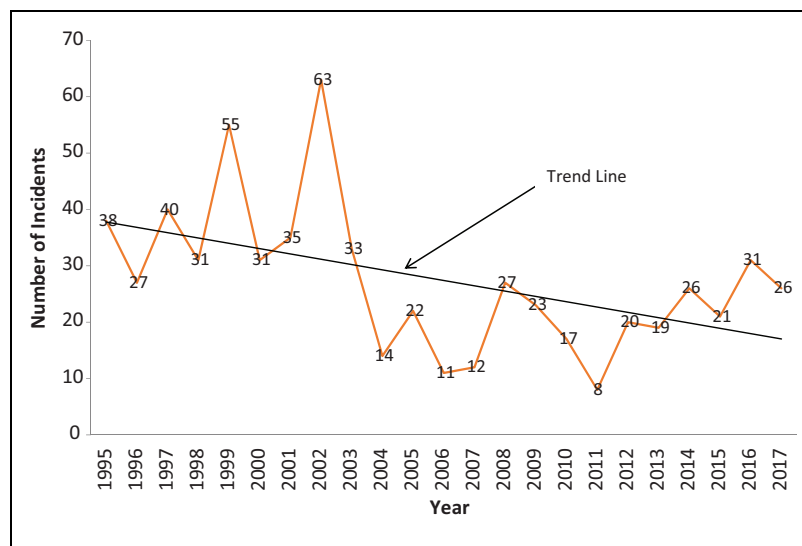
Figure 1. Number of terrorism incidents in the United States ($N = 630$) by year (1995–2017).

pie charts and figures. Taking this descriptive approach can be particularly useful in helping readers understand the properties and characteristics of the data (Silke, 2001, 2008) and plays a significant role in the production of knowledge (Silke, 2001; Walker, 2005). It is important to note the time-period assessments examine data from 1995 to 2017, while descriptive graphs examine data from post–9/11 to 2017. The data were divided to provide context for the problem prior to 9/11 as well as the reality of the problem after the mythmaking attack.

Results

Myth 1: Incidents are on the rise.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the first assumption was that terrorist attacks were on the rise. Figure 1 provides a 23-year temporal analysis of incidents occurring between January 1, 1995, and December 31, 2017. Despite this work's focus on post–9/11 discourse, the 1995 baseline contextualizes the terrorism problem before the 9/11 attacks. During this time, there were a total of 630 ideologically motivated incidents (an average of 27.4 incidents per year). Three of the four years with the greatest number of incidents occurred prior to the landmark terrorist attack were 1995 ($n = 38$), 1997 ($n = 40$), and 1999 ($n = 55$). The year with the most incidents occurred is 2002 ($n = 63$). In other words, a rise in terrorism incidents did occur *immediately* following 9/11. However, terrorism incidents then dropped dramatically in 2003 ($n = 33$) and 2004 ($n = 14$). This decrease then remained relatively consistent, with the least number of incidents occurring in 2011 ($n = 8$) and a trend line indicting an overall decrease during the entire time-period analysis.

Myth 2. Injuries and fatalities are increasing.

Despite the importance of identifying the number of incidents, discourse is often concerned with the level of violence and victimization. The second assumption is the number of injuries and fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks are increasing. However, findings suggest the opposite. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of incidents over the 16-year period after 9/11 ($N = 387$) resulted in no injuries (76.2%) or fatalities (57.4%). In other words, only 23.8% of incidents involved an injury (1 injury = 12.4%, 2–3 injuries = 3.9%, 4–10 injuries = 5.4%, 10+ injuries = 2.1%). A little over a quarter of incidents resulted in one death (29.2%), and 9.8% of incidents resulted in two to
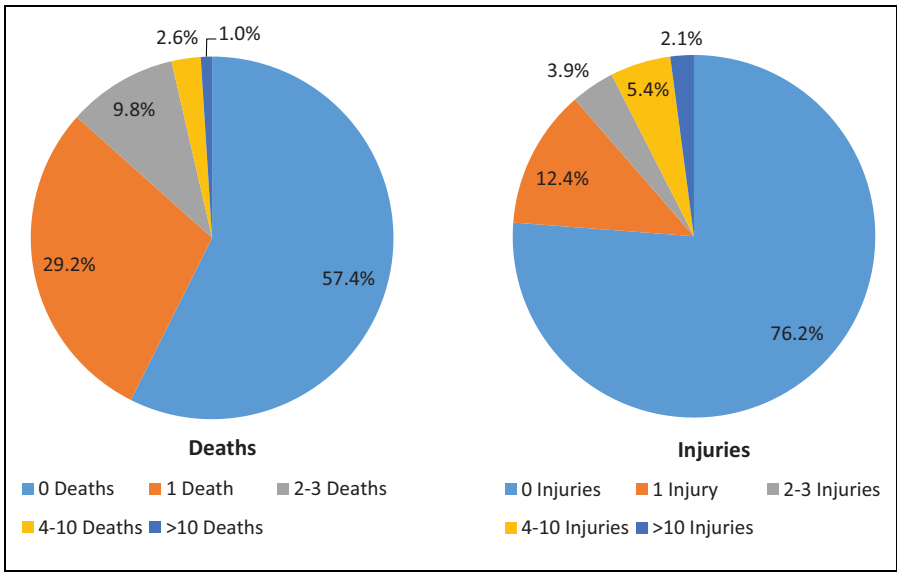
Figure 2. Incident deaths and injuries, post–9/11 to 2017 ($N = 387$).

three fatalities. Only 3.6% of incidents would be characterized as a mass killing (i.e., four or more fatalities; Fox & Levin, 2003)[8]—with 2.6% of incidents resulting in 4–10 deaths and 1% resulting in 10 or more.

It is important to emphasize the rare nature of terrorist incidents involving a large number of fatalities. On average, annual homicide counts total into the tens of thousands (i.e., 15,129 homicides in 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018), with terrorism deaths representing a fraction of the overall homicide picture (i.e., $n = 2,129$ over a 23-year period). Figure 3 further elaborates on the myth of mass casualties and illustrates the impact 9/11 has had on public perceptions of terrorism victimization. Events like 9/11—with casualties and injuries in the hundreds and even thousands—are considered "black-swan" events (Taleb, 2007). These incidents are so rare and so massive, it is almost impossible to predict the next similar attack (Taleb, 2007). Prior to 9/11, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing would be considered another black-swan event, particularly regarding injuries, as this attack accounts for the majority of deaths ($n = 168$) and injuries ($n = 881$) for that year. In the 16-year period since the 9/11 attacks, no other incident has matched the level of casualty severity. However, other black-swan events include the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings (resulting in only 3 deaths but 264 injuries) and the most fatal terrorist attack since 9/11—the 2016 Pulse Night Club shooting (resulting in 49 deaths and 53 injuries).

Myth 3. International threats are far worse than domestic threats.

The suspect-level attention to 9/11 was highly focused on the nationality of the perpetrators, pushing the national narrative toward the idea that international threats pose a more serious risk, while diminishing the impact of domestic threats. To this end, this work assessed the percentage of perpetrator citizenship and foreign background.[9] As shown in Figure 4, only 5.2% of perpetrators with identified citizenship were noncitizens ($n = 15$), and the overwhelming majority (94.8%) were American citizens ($n = 272$). Similarly, only 10.5% of perpetrators with identified alienage were foreign-born ($n = 30$), and 89.5% were native-born Americans ($n = 255$). Taken together, this research suggests domestic perpetrators pose a greater threat than international perpetrators.

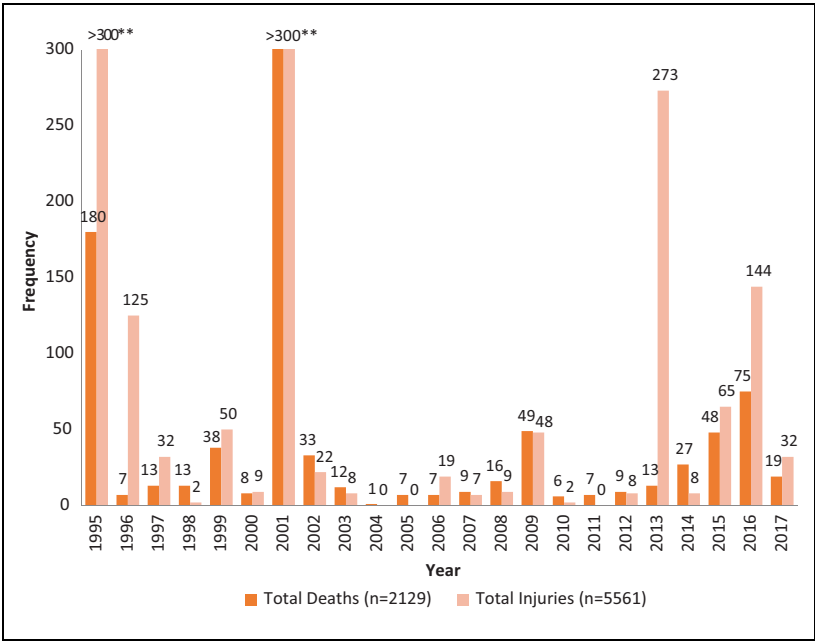**Myth 4.** Jihadist-inspired extremism is the greatest threat.

Figure 3. Number of incident deaths and injuries by year (1995–2017). *Injuries include Oklahoma City bombing (*n* = 881). **Deaths and injuries include 9/11; deaths (*n* = 1,538), injuries (*n* = 3,817).
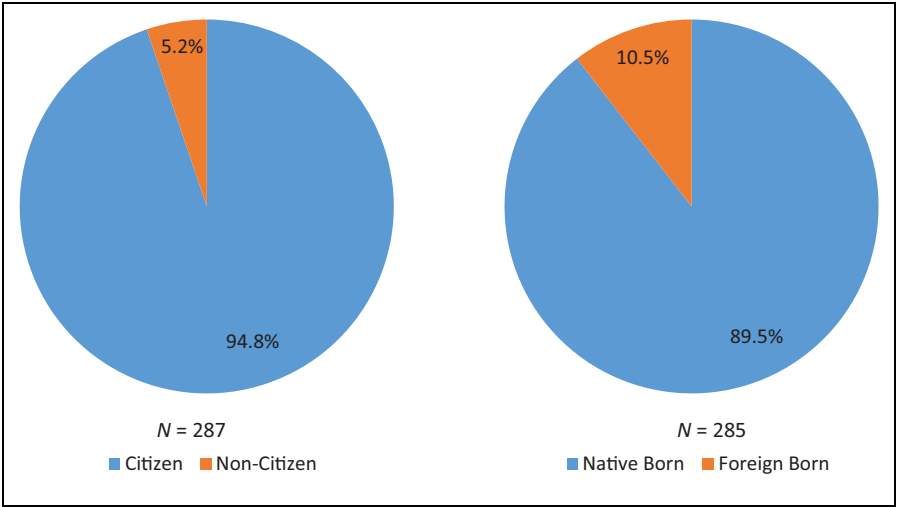

Figure 4. Citizenship and alienage of perpetrators, post–9/11 to 2017.

Within the national discourse, the majority of Americans are predominantly worried about the threat of jihadist-inspired extremism. Figure 5 highlights the nature of post–9/11 terrorism in the United States across ideologies, and these findings indicate jihadist-inspired attacks are actually the least common incident type. In fact, the greatest threat stems from the far right (*n* = 192). Almost half (49.6%) of the total domestic terrorist incidents (*n* = 387) were attributed to the far right. The second greatest threat stems from the far left (*n* = 124), making up 32% of incidents.[10] Contrary to
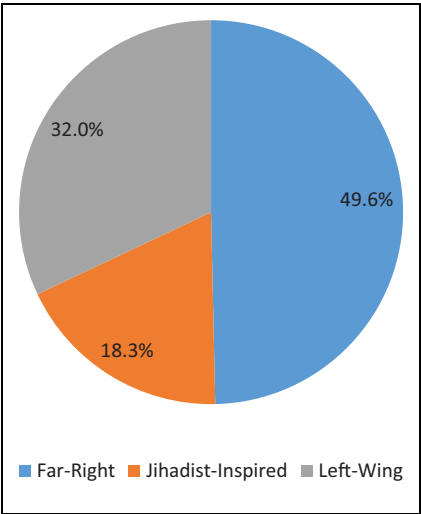
Figure 5. Terrorist incidents by ideology, post–9/11 to 2017 ($N = 387$).
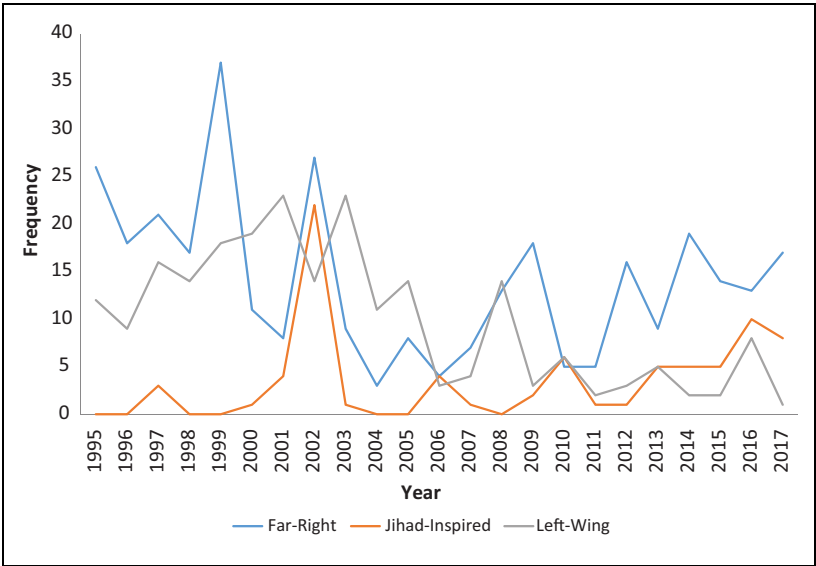

Figure 6. Ideological trends by year, 1995–2017 ($N = 630$).

public opinion, jihadist-inspired extremism only accounts for less than a fifth (18.3%) of all domestic terrorist incidents post–9/11 ($n = 71$).

This work examines temporal trends across different ideologies to better understand the exact nature of U.S. threats. As shown in Figure 6, jihadist-inspired and far-left extremism follow similar general trends as those found in Figure 1. However, far-right extremism has experienced a more dramatic change. At the beginning of 1995, far-right incidents peaked ($n = 37$) and outnumbered jihadist-inspired ($n = 0$) and far-left ($n = 12$) incidents. In the years immediately following the Oklahoma City bombing, far-right incidents decreased while jihadist-inspired increased. Following 9/11, jihadist-inspired ($n = 22$) incidents peaked in 2002, while far left ($n = 23$) peaked in 2003.
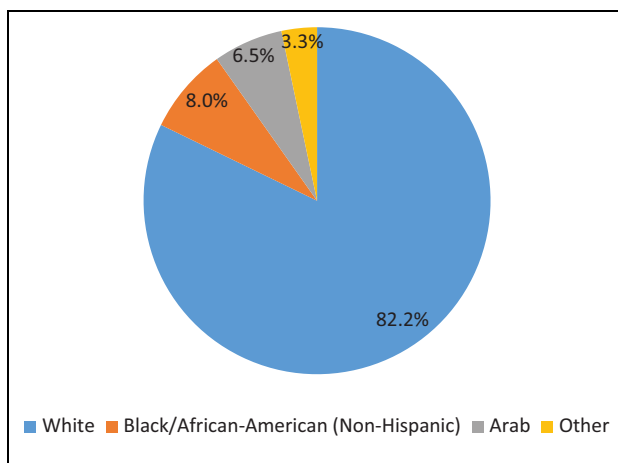
Figure 7. Perpetrator racial/ethnic backgrounds, post–9/11 to 2017 ($N = 325$).

Far-right incidents also experienced a dramatic increase from 2001 (n 8) to 2002 ($n = 27$). This is a dramatic increase (i.e., more than 300%), especially given the rare nature of terrorist events (i.e., black-swan incidents) and when considering how the universe of these events is so small compared to other more traditional forms of crime. Jihadist-inspired and far-left terrorism have been steadily declining, while far-right terrorism has experienced the opposite effect. Interestingly, since 9/11, there has not been a single year without a far-right terrorist incident, although there have been three years (2004, 2005, and 2008) with zero jihadist-inspired incidents.

    Myth 5. Terrorists are primarily of Arab descent.

    Related to this public notion that the greatest threat to the United States comes from jihadist-inspired perpetrators is the idea that the majority of perpetrators are of Arab descent. The current study was able to obtain race/ethnicity demographic information on 325 perpetrators of the 420 post–9/11 perpetrators. As shown in Figure 7, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators (82.2%) are actually White ($n = 237$). Black perpetrators accounted for 8% of overall perpetrators ($n = 26$). Even less common were Arab-descent perpetrators (6.5%) and "Others" (i.e., Hispanic, Asian, and biracial; 3.3%). These findings indicate perpetrators responsible for U.S. attacks after 9/11 were majority White and suggest claims that terrorists are primarily of Arab descent are not supported by these data.

    Myth 6: Organized groups present more of a threat than lone (wolf) actors.

    Due to the violent nature of terrorist events, popular discourse assumes incidents are largely carried out by highly organized networks. However, Figure 8 identifies the total number of incidents committed by lone-wolf perpetrators, and over two thirds (68.5%) of these incidents did not involve any direct contact or an organized group. In fact, only 30.8% of incidents were committed by organized groups ($n = 104$). This finding suggests that public perception of an organized terrorist threat may be inaccurate.

Discussion

    The current study finds the cultural trauma produced by 9/11 has contributed to media, public, and political discourse rooted in stereotypes and misconceptions concerning the nature of terrorism and the perpetrators of the phenomenon. This study examines six myths surrounding the phenomenon. Specifically, we found that post–9/11 terrorism (1) has been declining, (2) often involves no
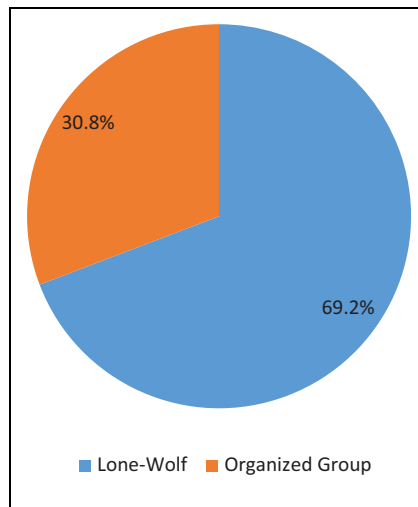
Figure 8. Terrorist incident affiliation, post–9/11 to 2017 ($N = 338$).

deaths or injuries, and is more often committed by (3) domestic, (4) far-right extremists, (5) of non-Arab decent, (6) working alone. These findings have important implications for public knowledge and policy responses to terrorism and extremist violence.

First, during the 21st century, journalists and politicians have at several points suggested that terrorism has greatly increased. This perceived rise in the terrorist threat has resulted in increased public panic and funding for counterterrorism strategies (Barnes, 2012). However, findings indicate that while terrorism incidents did increase in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, they then declined drastically over the last 15 years. What is abundantly clear—when assessing the number of incidents occurring between 1995 and 2017—is the largely random variability in the annual counts. This suggests policies should not only focus on preventing and countering violent extremism but also on reducing fear and anxiety—as inexpensively as possible—through the diffusion of accurate and valid information (Rosenthal & Muller, 2007). This strategy would limit terrorism's effectiveness by both reducing the number of attacks that are committed and limiting the harmful of consequences of those attacks that still occur. Studies show disseminating information can help reinforce a sense of control and accountability, while simultaneously reducing fear, anxiety, and uncertainty (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012; Hoffner, Fujioka, Ye, & Ibrahim, 2009; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). The current study emphasizes the need to debunk terrorism myths that can contribute to misplaced perceptions of a skewed crime picture. This approach to addressing the phenomenon also applies to the myth surrounding perceptions of victimization.

Second, without minimizing the pain and suffering of terrorist victims, findings illustrate that overall there are a limited number of deaths and injuries each year especially compared to the overall homicide rate. While terrorism does present a significant challenge to security, the majority of incidents involve no/few deaths and injuries. Importantly, these findings highlight the black-swan events (e.g., Boston bombing, Orlando nightclub) that contribute to fear of victimization. Rare events that eventually do produce mass casualties are difficult to predict and are not representative of the terrorism problem at-large. Discourse needs to consider the relatively rare nature of terrorism victimization (similar to school and mass shootings), especially in relation to other forms of crime and homicide. Media accounts evaluating risk of victimization omit national data that could ground these incidents within a broader context. For example, in 2012, there were 11,622 firearm homicides in the United States (Wintemute, 2015). Only two of those incidents were related to terrorism

(e.g., Wisconsin Sikh Temple shooting, Tulsa shooting). These two incidents accounted for the majority of the nine deaths and eight injuries related to terrorism that year. This suggests national funding, and attention, needs to continue focusing on alternative forms of harm reduction, public safety, and crime control. However, it is also important to remember that while fatal terrorist attacks are rare compared to other types of homicide violence, the identified increase in failed/foiled incidents is at least in part indicative of effective counterterror measures. These findings highlight the need for balanced approaches toward terrorism policy that consider the totality of the terrorism problem.

Third, the popular American discourse suggesting international terrorists pose the greatest threat has had an enormous impact on foreign policy. In response to this threat, 79% of Americans found air strikes and visa controls provide effective means of control against terrorism (Newport, 2015). Additionally, the majority of terrorism-prevention funding has been dedicated to foreign policy approaches including military interventions and lengthy nation building (Barnes, 2012). However, this study finds over 90% of the perpetrators who completed violent terrorist attacks on U.S. soil were American citizens. This suggests terrorism-prevention strategies would be better allocated to domestic terrorism prevention. When using these funds to target potential terrorist perpetrators, it is also vital to consider almost 90% of perpetrators are born in the United States. Policies that target immigrants are largely motivated by high-profile attacks like the recent San Bernardino shooting and New York City van attack. The latter resulted in President Trump calling for more extreme vetting of immigrants (Wilts & Sampathkumar, 2018). Despite their damage, the implications of these findings suggest they are only a small percentage of the terrorist threat.

Fourth, the perception of an international terrorism threat is also rooted in fear of jihadist-inspired extremism. Jackson (2007) finds political discourse surrounding jihadist-inspired terrorism is highly politicized and can oftentimes result in counterproductive security measures. This is especially true when considering findings that the threat to national security is largely driven by far-right extremism. The results from this study lend support to research theorizing terrorist activity has historically been characterized by "waves" of specific typologies (Hewitt, 2003; Rapoport, 2002). The differential increases in far-right terrorist activity compared to jihadist-inspired and far-left terrorist activity could be typical of a new wave of terrorism, moving beyond religion and focusing more on national identity. As a result, prevention strategies should focus on taking all terrorism threats seriously and not just those rooted in jihadist-inspired extremism. The danger of different threats should be recognized accordingly, with countermeasures tailored to typology and strategy.[11]

Fifth, this work reinforces the assertion the media associates certain groups of people with particular kinds of behavior (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2017). Immediately after the Oklahoma City bombing, news organizations were quick to identify Arabs as suspects and reported the FBI was looking for two men with dark hair and beards (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2003). This suggests the stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the race/ethnicity of perpetrators occurred even in the pre–9/11 period. Nonetheless, 9/11 only served to reinforce those initial beliefs identifying individuals of Arab descent as terrorists. When portraying Arabs, the mainstream media has tended to employ frameworks centered on violence, threat, extremism, fanaticism, and terrorism (Hurd, 2003; Jackson, 2007). Saleem, Prot, Anderson, and Lemieux (2017) find exposure to news portraying Arabs as terrorists is positively associated with support for military action in Arab countries as well as support for public policies that harm Arabs domestically and internationally. However, these findings indicate the problem is largely driven by White individuals. It is important for researchers, media outlets, and politicians to avoid falling for race/ethnicity stereotypes that contribute to labeling and may inadvertently increase the chances of further extremist violence. Promoting stereotypes prevents community cohesion and contributes to the continued exclusion of already marginalized groups.

Finally, this research counters the common myth that terrorists work in highly organized and sophisticated groups. Atran (2002) initially tried to counter these misconceptions with his findings

that terrorism is a decentralized and self-organized group of social networks, with individuals often brought together through social groups and local sports teams. However, Atran (2002) would still agree with claims that terrorists work together. This research, however, finds that two thirds of terrorist incidents are perpetrated by lone wolves. In other words, the entire idea of an organized cell, no matter how minimal the organization or sophistication, is largely inaccurate. This creates a new problem when creating policies aimed at targeting the phenomenon. Spaaij (2010) suggests preventing lone-wolf terrorism through standard approaches to organized terrorist networks is especially difficult. This is because the lack of communication with established terrorist organizations makes it nearly impossible to identify a perpetrator before an attack (Spaaij, 2010). Instead, the best methods for prevention, outside of identifying potential perpetrators, may be similar to strategies proposed for preventing other types of rare and random homicide (e.g., mass shootings), such as gun and mental health policies.

Limitations and Future Research

This work uses empirical evidence to identify six myths surrounding terrorism and extremist violence. Despite the importance of these findings, it is important to identify limitations and suggestions for future research investigating the phenomenon. First, the nature of terrorism means research is largely dependent on open-source data (LaFree & Dugan, 2004). The use of open-source data can at times provide better and more accurate information on key incident and demographic variables than more "official" data sources (LaFree, 2010; Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017). Nonetheless, open-source data collection that relies primarily on the use of newspapers/newswires may emphasize information pertaining to the more sensational cases while ignoring lesser known incidents (Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, & Lynch, 2012). Secondary sources are hardly produced for research purposes and therefore lack the methodological rigor inherent to empirical work. With open-source data, there is always the concern over missing values (Chermak et al., 2012). This study relied on databases that collect information from all publicly available sources including court and government documents that are made searchable via the Internet. Nonetheless, the ECDB and GTD data collection process is impacted by missing values associated with certain perpetrator characteristics (e.g., citizenship, alienage, and race/ethnicity). Future studies should continue exploring innovative methods for identifying details surrounding terrorism information and provide detailed accounts of the data collection process.

Second, this study took the first step toward demystifying public knowledge of the terrorism problem in the United States. Descriptive analyses work well for public consumption of information by providing simple accounts of a social problem. Future studies should expand this research by using more advanced statistical analyses to identify significant differences in terrorism characteristics. For instance, the uses of regressions could be used to identify statistically significant differences between perpetrator and incident characteristics (see, e.g., Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015).

Third, this study has offered important insight for the study and understanding of terrorism in the United States including the disparity between perceptions of terrorism victimization and actual victimization. Future research would benefit from statistical comparisons between terrorism and other types of extreme violence (e.g., mass shootings) that could potentially affect society on a much wider scale. Providing evidence on all types of extreme violence can not only help steer the national discourse toward a more accurate direction but can help better inform policy to prioritize threats and the allocation of resources. Additionally, further scrutiny into the nuances of victimization can also prove beneficial for terrorism research. For example, while far-right perpetrators may be responsible for a higher volume of incidents, jihadist-inspired perpetrators may be responsible for a higher volume of victims per incident (e.g., the Boston bombers, San Bernardino shooters, Orlando night-club shooter). Addressing victimization disparities across different ideological perspectives can

provide pivotal information for policy stakeholders, including, but not limited to, improving emergency preparedness strategies.

Finally, this work did not address criminological theory; however, some suggestions are offered for incorporating criminological perspectives into future research. For example, extremists who commit violent crimes can be influenced by similar strains as those experienced by traditional criminals. The overwhelming representation of far-right perpetrators over other ideologies demands further investigation. Additional analyses of the perpetrator-level data can reveal motivation nuances that may highlight strain and anomie resulting from feeling the threat of an ethnic other or governmental restrictions. Similar to research addressing connections between strain/anomie and gang membership (Pyrooz, Fox, & Decker, 2010; Vowell & May, 2000), future research can address whether the same anomic mechanisms that encourage crime (i.e., detachment, alienation) contribute toward terrorist behavior. Additionally, future empirical efforts could benefit from applying qualitative methods as way to conduct in-depth analyses of lone-wolf perpetrators. Research suggests that lone-wolf terrorists are better educated, yet more socially isolated, than perpetrators with direct affiliations to organized groups (Smith, Gruenewald, Roberts, & Damphousse, 2015). Applying Sampson and Laub's (1995) research on criminal pathways and turning points could provide some key information on self-radicalization, which would allow insight for agencies and programs countering violent extremism.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Although this work is highlighting myths addressed by reporters and journalists, it should be noted that Hamm (2007) has also examined the difference between terrorists and criminals. Specifically, his work examines the ways in which terrorists have engaged in crimes for logistical purposes, analyzing their actions via routine activities and social learning theories.
2. The Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) includes information on extremist incidents, suspects, and victims. For an incident to be included in the ECDB, it must (1) be an illegal violent incident or an illegal financial scheme within United States and (2) at least one of the suspects must subscribe to either a far-right, jihadist-inspired, or environmental/animal rights extremist belief system (Freilich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin, 2014).
3. 2017 Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data were unavailable at the time of this study.
4. This includes plots and homicides.
5. They support Sharia law as the blueprint for a modern Muslim society and find it should be forcibly implemented. Jihadist-inspired extremists reject the traditional Muslim respect for *People of the Book* (i.e., Christians and Jews) and believe that "Jihad" is a defining belief in Islam, while also endorsing violence against "corrupt" others (Freilich et al., 2014, p. 380). Under this worldview, jihadist-inspired extremists believe the Muslim faith is oppressed within corrupt governments, specifically within the United States where Muslim values are negatively affected as a result of American hedonism (i.e., support of gay rights and feminism). The American people are in turn responsible for their government's actions, and extremists then have a religious obligation to combat this assault (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015; Freilich et al., 2014).

6. They believe in conspiracy theories predicting a serious threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty and contend that the personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack. Because of these beliefs, far-right extremists consider their personal and national identities as already lost, or at the very least, threatened by a specific ethnic, racial, or religious group. By and large, far-right extremists engage in/support paramilitary operations and training in order to prepare for these perceived imminent attacks (Freilich et al., 2014).

7. Their primary ideological focus and criminal activities stem from their belief of "deep ecology," which promotes the idea that everything found in the natural world has equal value, and humans have no legitimate claim to dominate earth. Environmental and animal rights extremists believe that the earth and animals are imminent from the government and corporations whose environmentally irresponsible actions will ultimately result in the destruction of the natural world; therefore, the "system" is incapable of taking actions to protect the environment and biological diversity, and the only way to defend the environment and animals is through justifiable violent acts. This study includes animal and environmental rights extremists who have been suspected of ideologically motivated violent crimes (e.g., arson of property viewed as excessively harmful to the environment and animal habitats; Freilich et al., 2014).

8. Beyond the four or more fatalities threshold, Fox and Levin (2003), as well as other mass violence scholars (see Silva & Capellan, 2018), define a mass killing as a single incident targeting at least some victims either for their symbolic value or at random.

9. This study identified 420 unique perpetrators. However, since these results are driven by open-source data, obtaining certain suspect demographic information (i.e., citizenship, alienage, race/ethnicity) can be quite difficult. For example, the GTD and ECDB provided citizenship and alienage measures for 287 and 285 suspects, respectively.

10. It is interesting to note the majority of far-left incidents were perpetrated by environmental and animal-rights extremists ($n = 101$).

11. Of particular interest to policy is the potential for ideological crossover (such as the Devon Arthurs case) where perpetrators may convert from one ideology to another or the possibility of cross collaboration between extremists in pursuit of similar interests (i.e., the vilification of similar targets, engaging in criminal, non-ideologically motivated behavior) that can present unique problems in managing risks and threat assessments. Thus, all threats should be taken seriously and considered accordingly through targeted strategies.

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